Stakeholder views about social work programme curricula:

One university's experiences of consulting stakeholders in the re-validation of qualifying social work programmes

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Summary: This article describes the way in which consultations with stakeholders contributed to the re-validation of two UK qualifying social work programmes at a London University. The aim was to better position the new curricula in current practice realities. Consultations with service-users, employers, present and past students facilitated substantial revisions of the taught programme, with social work skills in particular receiving a much higher priority. The data generated by this study illustrates how the tensions inherent in the incorporation of differing standpoints can be reconciled through careful consideration and reflection.

Keywords: curricula; qualifying social workers; stakeholder views; service-users views; social work skills; current practice

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Introduction

As part of the re-validation of two qualifying social work programmes service-users, employers, alumni and current students were all directly consulted and contributed to substantial revisions of the curricula. This article outlines the approach towards consultation with sets of stakeholders which was achieved through discussion groups, an e-survey, and in some instances telephone and e-mail consultations. In this way, inputs from various standpoints were able to be included in the planning of the re-validated taught programmes. The key findings from each data collection tool are considered, together with their contribution to the final curricula and also the wider implications for social work education.

Although all three sets of stakeholders are routinely involved in other aspects of the delivery and re-validation of the university's social work programmes, this article focuses on their involvement with curriculum design. Two different programmes are considered; one undergraduate programme which was successfully revalidated in 2007/8 and a post-graduate programme due for re-validation in 2008/9. The first re-validation incorporated the first set of consultations only, with the subsequent re-validation benefiting from the key findings from both sets of consultations.

Previous social work validations have tended to focus on accommodating policy and employer initiated changes. This re-validation process, however, incorporated a broader perspective for the planning of the new curricula. The aim was to re-position the teaching programmes within a broader base that reflected and incorporated the views of our main stakeholders. The data generated by this study illustrates how the tensions inherent in the incorporation of differing standpoints can be reconciled through careful consideration and reflection.

Literature review

Since the New Labour government was elected in 1997, the UK has maintained a political and policy focus on public services and the need to modernise them (Department of Health, 1998). In terms of social work qualifying education and training this had resulted, in 2003, with the replacement of the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), by a three year degree programme as the minimum level of qualification (Care Standards Act 2000, Department of Health, 2002). Preston-Shoot (2004) described how the social work degree addresses the key principles and objectives of *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998). The five compulsory subjects on social work qualifying curricula are: the study of human growth and development, law, social work skills, social work interventions and inter-professional social work (Department of Health, 2002).

There were a number of reasons for the replacement of the DipSW with the new social work degree: concerns around the integration of theory with practice, lack of focus on research, lack of depth, some areas were covered which were not necessary and other areas were not sufficiently addressed (J M Consulting, 1999). There was also the need to bring the social work qualification into line with other EU countries (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Issues in and changes to social work education have echoes in other professions such as nursing (Manthorpe et al., 2005). However, there are some research findings to indicate that in nursing (which retains a diploma with an optional degree) there are no significant differences in competence during the first three years after qualification between those who hold a diploma and those who have a degree (Robinson et al., 2003). One area in which there was a major difference between the diploma and degree nurses was that the latter were likely to be much less satisfied with their careers three years post qualification. This may have relevance for graduates of the new social work degree in that expectations of improvements in competency in comparison to DipSW graduates may be unfounded. A 2002 survey of recently qualified DipSW social workers found that two thirds of newly qualified social workers were satisfied or very satisfied with their social work education (Lyons and Manion, 2004). These studies may suggest that the differences between DipSW and degree graduates may not be obvious but could require a more subtle

and longitudinal analysis of social work graduates which includes the exploration of such topics as job satisfaction.

The Department of Health commissioned a longitudinal evaluation of the new degree in 2004, which has now been published (Moriarty et al., 2008). Moriarty et al. (2008) reported inter alia:

- A substantial number of social work students were satisfied with their experience of higher education.
- Social work educators are teaching to the Department of Health requirements for the degree. The QAA Benchmark statement in Social Work was considered to be helpful in mapping the undergraduate degree
- Two areas were viewed as problematic: inter-professional education and computer literacy (cf. Lyons and Manion, 2004)
- Courses do have different ways of delivering the curriculum but core generic learning is provided as well as opportunities for specialist learning
- Voluntary placements require extra support to ensure students are able to benefit from learning opportunities (cf. Baron, 2004)
- Postgraduate courses remain popular and there is little evidence of student withdrawal or failure

Doel et al. (2007) suggest first placements are tending to be more experimental in nature with opportunities for new types of practice learning placements and, for example, the creation of group models of student supervision. However, Doel et al. do express a concern that there may be possible inconsistencies in standards, particularly with regard to fitness for practice learning. Another issue raised by Doel et al. is that employer stakeholders seem not to be clear about their role and involvement within the new university-led partnerships. Burgess (2004) makes the point that curriculum design is relatively little understood or researched and there is a high level of complexity in social work curriculum design as a result of the various and distinct stakeholders.

Research strategy

Each of the three main groups of stakeholders in social work education was separately consulted: a) the employers b) the service-users and c) the students.

Employers and service-users

Discussion, or focus, groups were selected as being appropriate for the main data collection method. In selecting methods that seek to minimise the researcher/stakeholder power imbalance, focus groups offer potential. They also excel at providing in-depth qualitative data and enable an inter-action with the researcher to steer the discussion towards areas of particular interest and to explore unexpected data in a responsive manner. An example of this occurred within the young people's discussion group, when agency social workers were described by two young people as 'bad' social workers. We were able to probe this response and find out the reasoning for the judgment.

The selected design of the focus groups was for pre-written questions, between three and six, to be discussed by the group, with the researcher checking out the emerging themes. Focus groups enable understandings to be summarized and for checks to be made with respondents for accuracy and validity about the sense that researchers bring to the data. Although groups of eight to twelve are thought desirable for market research purposes, sociological research usually uses smaller group sizes (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Kreuger and Casey, 2000; Robson, 2002). There is debate whether the groups should be homogenous (Kreuger and Casey, 2000; Robson, 2002). In this evaluation the groups were homogenous, in that they were discrete groups of one type of stakeholder, for example employers.

Students

For the student consultations, discussion groups were selected for use with current students. There is an acknowledgement within the pedagogy of higher education that student feedback can be helpful

in the evaluation of effective teaching and learning (Fry, 1999). The theories and concepts which underpin understandings of student learning (Bloom, 1956), together with the concepts discussed in this proposal, were understood to be culturally specific to Western societies. Whilst a generalist understanding of student learning is understood to be helpful in curriculum design, regular feedback to measure student learning can be essential. The university's system for monitoring units after their delivery has been useful as a quality assurance tool, but to understand student learning in order to take feedback on board or to ensure an acceptable level of delivery for students, monitoring levels of student learning and experience throughout the unit is recommended (Race, 1999). Following Race's guidance, one should regularly ask a small group of students for informal feedback, which should be taken on board in revising the knowledge input. Within a credit-rated teaching system, these evaluations have tended to be either a quality control measure at the end of a teaching unit, or more informal feedback from students during earlier teaching sessions.

Alumni

The decision to include alumni was taken to reflect anxieties within the social work profession that newly qualified workers might experience difficulties in adjusting to the realities of social work practice. In including alumni, the aim was to also include post-university evaluations of the way in which the social work teaching programme had prepared students for the realities of social work practice. The rationale for this inclusion was that it made feedback of the student experience systematic in that alumni knowledge had been tested in the workplace by professional practice.

Due to the geographical dispersal of the students upon graduation, an e-survey was selected as being less resource intensive than face-to-face research methods. The aim was to both maximise the potential number of respondents and also to include a more representative sample than relying on those students who had remained in the proximity of the university.

Computer-mediated communication has been largely recognised as an aid to quantitative research (Thomas, 2004). The suitability of computer interviewing has roots in the concept that less direct methods

of communication are often preferable to participants, particularly those who may find the power imbalance of being interviewed by a researcher in a position of relative power difficult to negotiate (Christensen and James, 2000). Former students remain in a dependent relationship with academics through such processes as the need for references. Through measures as offering an alternative for the e-mail survey of sending in an anonymous completed survey form by post, we attempted to minimise potential discomfort for alumni.

Alderson and Morrow (2004), in their ethical guidelines for research with young people, point out that there is a need to balance the risk of excluding socially marginalised and excluded groups from research studies against the potential risk of reinforcing social inequalities through participation in research. The choice of research methods was seen by Alderson and Morrow as key to minimising power differentials. The limited research methods literature about online surveys suggests that the use of computer assisted interview or research methods may offer opportunities to communicate more effectively with some research populations or types of respondents within those populations (Bryman, 2001, Berg, 2004, Payne and Payne, 2004). Whilst online discussions carry ethical risks such as exposure to harassment, surveys are a discrete interaction and pose less ethical dilemmas than most electronic research methods (Payne and Payne, 2004).

An electronic survey also offers greater anonymity and is a time-effective way to gather data from a large number of participants, whatever their geographical location. Although a feeling of anonymity can be engendered by electronic communication (Shepherd, 2003), it can be problematic for the researcher, in assessing the confirmability of data collected online. Shepherd's qualitative multi-method research study of young Australian mental health service-users generated different types of data. Shepherd found that for busy participants, online research methods worked well:

> Traditional qualitative interviewing techniques are suitable for those who like expressing themselves through speech, but may discriminate against those who feel shy about talking to strangers, who prefer to communicate via the written word or who are simply too busy to set aside an hour or so to be interviewed. (Shepherd, 2003, p. 22)

The use of e-mail addresses compromises confidentiality, however

this risk can be avoided with an electronic survey by such means as posting the survey on a website for completion or offering participants the alternative of printing and posting the completed survey form (Thomas, 2004). Just as in any survey, caution does need to be exercised concerning the generalisability of the data collected, in relation to sampling, the verification of the respondents' identity and in the ethical conduct of online research. It does however suggest that some topics may be better, or more fully, explored using the more indirect methods afforded by electronic research methods.

Denscombe (2003) outlines three possible ways of conducting a computer survey: by e-mailing the questions directly to the participant, by sending an e-mail with the questionnaire as an attachment, or by posting the questionnaire on a web-page. Issues relating to requisite computer skills within the sample frame. Both research tools selected were considered as the most appropriate for the data collection from that stakeholder group.

Methods

Employers

We ran two separate discussion groups with the social work employers who work in partnership with the university; the first was for the BA re-validation consultation and the second for that of the master's programme. The first group consisted of three training officers from different local authorities and one manager from a voluntary agency and two university lecturers as facilitators. Data was also included in the form of answers to the same questionnaire from a fourth local authority training officer who was unable to attend the consultation session. This participant had asked to contribute via e-mail. We sent an electronic version of the discussion group questions and were sent detailed suggestions on all the areas that we had requested information about. These were subsequently incorporated into the key findings from this group.

The MSc employer stakeholder consultation encountered difficulties in arranging a meeting with employers. Therefore employers were telephoned and the questions were discussed via either a telephone conversation or the option of submitting a written feedback response.

Questions we asked employers

1. Are we equipping our students with appropriate skills for the workplace?
2. Do we equip our students with an appropriate theory and knowledge-base?
3. How do we compare with other universities?
4. What do you consider are the gaps in the current teaching and learning on the BA Social Work programme?
5. What are the key policy drivers for the next 5 years?
6. What are the best/most useful topics taught on the BA social work programme?

Students

An electronic survey of the social work students who have completed the programmes was administered. This was achieved by means of contacting them through their self-informed e-mail addresses. An electronic version of the information sheet, consent form and questionnaire were attached. The aim was for this be completed and returned by the participants electronically. A down-loadable version was also available, as was a paper and postal alternative to enable the inclusion of any alumni who do not have access to the internet, or who preferred a more anonymous response.

The guiding hypothesis was that the experience of seeking and embarking on professional practice may cause students to re-evaluate their taught units. Common areas or themes may be identified as suggested improvements to the current teaching programme.

We divided the topics for the focus groups into three areas: teaching, assessments and practice learning placements. Within these general headings we asked open questions about their experiences and what they thought worked well and what needed to be changed.

Questions we asked Students

1. What feedback would you give us about teaching? On the programme, there may be subjects or topics that are taught about the right amount and others that are under taught or over taught.
2. First of all, what subjects do you think are taught about the right amount?

3. What subjects are under taught, subjects that you don't get enough input on?
4. What subjects are over taught?
5. Overall, how would you rate the standard of teaching on the programme?
6. What makes it hard to complete the dissertation? (MSc ONLY)
7. How can we help students complete it? (MSc ONLY)
8. We use a variety of different methods of assessment – essays, portfolios and individual presentations. What feedback would you give us on how we assess you? (Prompt: How helpful is the feedback you receive on assessments?)
9. What feedback would you give us on practice placements? What are the positive aspects and the less positive

Service-Users

The first service-user group consulted (C1) was a group of young people who were care-leavers. We introduced the session by saying that we were in the process of re-writing the curriculum, the lesson plans, for social work students and would welcome their advice as experts by experience. We asked the following main questions, with prompts where appropriate;

1. What do social workers need to be able to do?
2. What is a 'good', skilled social worker like?
3. What is a 'bad' social worker like?
4. What do social workers need to know to be able to help young people?
5. How can we tell if students are going to be good social workers?

The second service-user group (C2) was an established group of adult users of mental health services, who had contributed regularly to the university's social work programmes. We asked them slightly different questions, some of which were aimed at facilitating better service-user involvement on the programme. In relation to the curriculum we ask

1. What is it important that students on the programme learn?
2. How should we mange the potential tensions between advocating

for service-users and the demands of social work agencies for social workers to follow agency policies?
3. What is it like to be a service user contributing to the programme and working with students and student groups

Samples

Employers

Six training officers participated in the BA consultation, five at the group discussion and one via e-mail. This latter participant sent detailed suggestions on all the areas that we had requested information about. For the MSc feedback a meeting was held with one employer and three telephone conversations occurred with other employers.

Students

The student sample consisted of a survey sent to BA and MSc Social Work alumni and focus groups of Year 2 and Year 3 BA and MSc Year 1 and Year 2 social work students

Focus groups

There were four separate focus groups for each cohort. 22 BA students attended: 10 from Year 2 (n=60) and 12 from Year 3 (n=60). 12 MSc students participated: 8 students from Year 1 (n=46) attended and 4 from Year 2 (n=44).

Electronic survey

The response to the survey was disappointing. Only 9 alumni responded: 2 were BA graduates (n=150) and 7 were the MSc (n=70). This was attributed to the difficulty in contacting students who had

often moved address after graduation and no longer had access to the university e-mail system that had been the main tutor/student contact route.

Service-Users

These groups were disappointingly small, but non-the-less quite vocal.

Care-experienced young people

Although the sample size for the initial service-user group was smaller than anticipated, with two participants, we managed to gather clear messages from a perspective that is an emergent voice in social work education. On reflection, the timing of the discussion group for first thing in the morning may have mitigated against wider participation from young people.

Adult users of mental health services

The participants in this group were volunteers drawn from an established group of service-users, who make regular contributions to the university's social work teaching programmes

Data analysis

Whilst qualitative data analysis is always an interpretive process (Gillespie, 2002), some methods rely more on interpretation than others. A thematic approach was adopted to understand the data. In considering the data analysis, the data from the group discussions and the electronic survey were separately analysed thematically. Bryman's premise that one can have enhanced confidence in findings derived by using more than one way of "measuring" a concept (Bryman, 2001) was adopted, whilst recognising the possibility that data are shaped by the method used. Making sense of the data from the group discussion and the survey formed initial understandings from which we identified key findings. The diversity of experiences and differing standpoints of the participant groups in this study undermined the general assumptions

that could be made about similarities. Despite these reservations, some commonalities in approaches to curricula improvement emerged.

Using the key messages in curriculum design

Key Messages from Employers

- The BA and MSc programmes meet their requirements, with the university's social work graduates being well-regarded in the workplace
- Safeguarding and social work skills should be central to the curriculum
- Youth offending, social inclusion, inter-professional working and direct payments likely to become higher priorities for social work agencies over the next five years
- Written and assessment skills were highlighted as essential skills needing to be focused on
- The limited administrative support available to academic staff hampered liaison with employers, for example most employers expected to obtain information or leave messages with named personnel.

Key messages from students

Across the BA and MSc Programmes

- When students share modules with students from other professions, it is important to be clear about the social work part and to ensure the social work element is an integral part of the teaching
- Timing and place of modules within the timetable is important
- Students struggled with European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL): where possible it is better for students to have set time to complete it in Year 1. Students also queried its value and the practical problems about undertaking it.
- Practice learning was valued by all students. There were issues around lack of choice of placement.

- There was an identified need for more teaching in certain areas but there was no student consensus on which topics but the areas tended to be quite specialist e.g. assertiveness training, sensory impairment.

MSc students

- Students struggled with the requirement to complete an 18-20 000 word dissertation on active research in order to obtain the MSc Social Work award; this was due to the competing demands of long placements and academic assessment load. They felt the dissertation was too long and that a shorter more focussed dissertation unit would be more suitable
- Students felt the inter-professional research unit (a prerequisite unit which students must pass before they can do their dissertation) did not reflect the particular complexities of social work as a discipline

Alumni

- The social work programme was rated very good or good at equipping them with the appropriate knowledge base for the reality of post-qualifying practice
- Practice learning opportunities were rated very good or good at preparing students for the reality of [post-qualifying practice
- Overall the social work programme was rated good or adequate at equipping students for practice as qualified social workers
- Students thought employers considered the qualification from this university to be very good or good

Key messages from service-users:

Key Messages from the first group

Overall, the participants had clear ideas about what makes for good and bad social workers. In general, the young people wanted social work students to be taught more social work skills. They were also clear in

their expectations that qualifying social workers should work in a way that prioritised their commitment to working with and for young people. The key messages were that qualifying social workers should be:

- Really caring and not just doing their job and being officious, for example they should send the child or young person a birthday card.
- Acting for Children, NOT managers. They shouldn't always take no for an answer but be willing to challenge social work managers to make them more responsive to children and young people's needs.
- They should offer an individual service, not pro forma letters.
- They should be able to explain things properly and respect children and young people's privacy, especially when breaching privacy causes comeback for the children if they complain about parents or carers.
- They should get to know children and young people, their strengths as well as the problems. They should also stay around and not work for an agency.

Key messages from the second group

The key messages were that qualifying social workers should be taught:

- People skills: be able to gain trust, build rapport, form relationships and listen to service-users. Creativity in problem solving was seen as of particular value, particularly where it comes to engaging service users
- An understanding of and a willingness to engage with the emotional elements of social work. This may involve using non-standard teaching approaches poetry or art for example. Students need to learn to value these ways of working
- The ability to challenge stereotypes, including their own pre-conceptions about service users
- A number of more specific suggestions were made about how the programme could address service user issues more effectively, for example by aiming to produce workers who were both competent professionals but also willing and able to challenge the organisations in which they worked to make them more responsive to users needs.

Findings

The three different groups of stakeholders that we consulted gave advice that had both similarities and differences across the three data-sets.

The similarities

Skills were identified as the main area requiring greater priority in the curriculum by all three groups. Assertiveness training and effective assessment and recording were particularly identified as key to contemporary social work practice. Areas such as inter-professional working and social work skills are recognised as key to social work training, indeed they are prerequisites for a qualification in social work (Department of Health, 2002). These consultations, however, enabled us to focus on which skills to include in the curricula and gave us the confidence to prioritise skills teaching.

The differences

The differences were largely attributed to their differing stances in relation to social work education. Service-users clearly perceived a difference between social workers and social work students who advocated strongly on their behalf and those who followed agency protocols. They were keen for social work education to reflect this by equipping students to act as advocates instead of employees of social services. Students discovered gaps in their current learning from the knowledge and skills required on placement. This was attributed both to their need for a more contemporary knowledge-base to equip them more effectively to deal with practice realities, for example by guiding them through the dilemmas involved with working with substance-misuse, and also a need to present themselves as knowledgeable within the social work employment field.

Social work managers largely identified gaps in the skills of qualifying social workers; they require qualifying workers who are ready and able to carry out the tasks required of them by social work agencies.

Summary

Notwithstanding the differing standpoints among the various stakeholders, the key messages about skills were broadly similar. The differing standpoints became evident on the issue of advocacy: service-users valuing social workers who advocated on their behalf, not their managers!

Conclusions

Using key messages from three different groups of stakeholders in social work education has guided the successful re-positioning of social work curricula within a contemporary theoretical and skill-based context. In the original validations the consultation had been limited largely to one set of stakeholders, namely, employers. The present consultations yielded many commonalities across the three sets of stakeholders, but also some unexpected findings. Positive feedback about the revised curricula was received from the social work regulatory body, the General Social Care Council, and the validation boards for both programmes.

Through the use of a broad-based review that involved three different groups of stakeholders in social work education we have moved towards curricula that aim to prepare qualifying social work students for 21st century practice.

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